To-day's School-Leavers: The 'Me' Generation or the 'We' Generation?

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ABSTRACT

The primary goals of this study are to better understand this generation's motivation to engage in active and collaborative learning through community engagement (CE). Australian universities highlight service as a priority within their mission. Additionally, a growing pedagogical focus highlights the importance of community service as an integral component of student development. To-day's youth are thought to be the 'me' generation not the 'we' generation (Ungar, 2006). In contrast, 92 of 120 first year students surveyed responded that they welcome the opportunity to contribute to society and learn through service. However, contrary to some research findings these first years did not report lack of time and financial constraints but stated that their perceived barriers to participation in CE are lack confidence, guidance and knowledge. The project has support from community, Griffith University and senior students and aims to increase students' sense of belonging through CE.

'Me to We Generation' Community Engagement Project Description

Many refer to the youth of today as the 'me' generation not the 'we' generation (Ungar 2009). In contrast, 92 from 120 first-years (FYs) responded in a survey indicating that they would welcome the opportunity to participate in community service (CE). However, FYs reported that while they are motivated they lack confidence and knowledge. Fig 1 shows the FY's community engagement interests and campus of study.
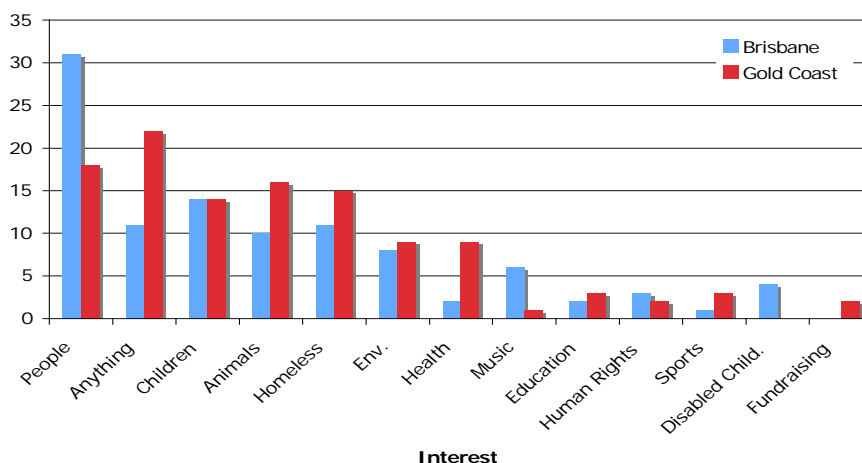

Fig 1. First-Years' home campus and areas of interest in community engagement

Today's School Leavers: The "Me" Generation or the "We" Generation? Nuts and Bolts

1

Three years ago, Griffith established the Honours College as an initiative to attract and retain high achieving students. Each year 140 undergraduates are invited to become members of the College. The Honours College aims to enhance students' employability through leadership, communication, intellectual curiosity and global experiences. Prior to the implementation of the Community Engagement Project, Griffith Honours College members participated in CE on an ad hoc basis. Advanced students, reflecting on their own FY experiences, believe that the community, the University and students benefit from CE however to become involved FY students need peer and academic support. The FY students reported that the major barriers to their participation in CE are not financial or time but lack of confidence and knowledge. The students leading the Project believe that FYs' fears will be minimised through a sense of inclusion driven by their peers.

The CE Project is philosophically based on Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) and uses this international association as a base. Figure 2 shows the structure.
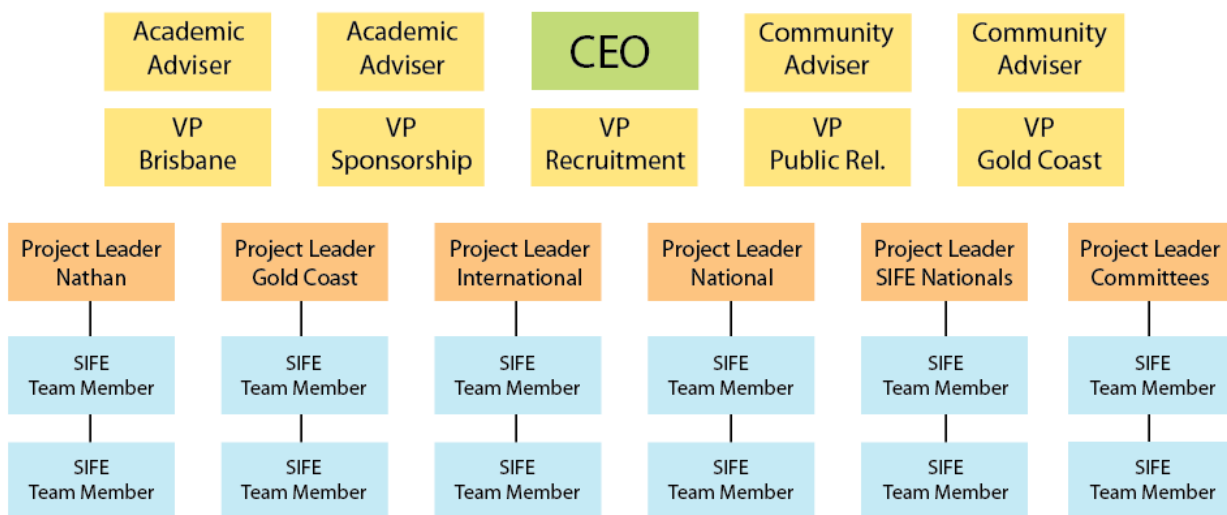

Figure 2. 'Me to We Generation' CE Structure

University and community support is an integral component for a successful program. A popular third year student was appointed as the Foundation CEO. The Project Leaders are either self nominated or by invitation from the Executive (yellow and green on the diagram). The role of Project Leader is to identify the community issue, form and lead the team (ie. RSPCA, Children's Hospital). All students are invited to join an established team or self nominate to form their own teams. The University has demonstrated its support through the identification of suitable people to fill the roles of Academic and Community Advisers.

Annual incentives are offered on a competitive basis - Participation in SIFE National and volunteering nationally and internationally (ie. 2009 Cambodia and Peru). Sponsorship from external and the University is sought to offset some of the costs for students.

Literature Review

Today's School Leavers: The "Me" Generation or the "We" Generation? Nuts and Bolts

2

'Parents do not consciously raise their children to be self-centred, there are subtle and not-so-subtle things that teach our children to think about themselves ("me") first, and about others ("we") second' (Ungar 2009, p.5). Data from the survey demonstrate that respondents are not self-serving and in contrast they are keen to assist others. Many students find transition to university very challenging, their inability to effectively navigate the university so this has been investigated by a large number of academic researchers. Early intervention increasing FYs sense of inclusion through peer-led activities is believed to provide the support necessary to encourage students to remain at university (Lea, Stephenson & Troy 2003). Building a culture of the 'We Generation' can be achieved through personally experiencing compassion, and being provided with responsibility and engagement as citizens (Ungar 2009).

Through national funding introduced in 2003, student engagement has raised its importance. Students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, often do not have the necessary cultural or knowledge capital to negotiate the university culture. Many of their expectations developed prior to arrival at university are not discussed. The onus is on universities to accommodate students who for whatever reasons are not comfortable in their new environment (Tinto 1988). Firstly, based on the recognition of the need to better prepare students for the university environment, many transition programs have been designed to address the gaps in students' knowledge. The majority of these programs rely on underprepared students to identify their own gaps and have the confidence to attend the transition activity. Secondly, students who are involved in CE activities feel more connected to the university community. When students feel connected and have a sense of belonging they are less likely to withdraw from their university studies (Tinto 1988).

Research conducted into transition highlights the vital role that peer interaction plays in feeling a sense of belonging to the University community. McInnis et al (2000) discuss how interaction between peers is fundamental to building successful learning communities. Peer interaction and networking can aid the transition and adjustment of FYs (Kantanis 2000). The formal and informal interactions students have with their peers shape their academic and personal engagement, modifying their commitment to their own study and their feeling of inclusion in the university (Tinto 1993). Not surprising, FY is the time when the risk of discontinuing studies for undergraduates is greatest (McInnes, et al., 2000). The strength of this program that has been designed by student peers is that it enables discussion of university culture from a student's perspective and therefore deals with the 'hidden expectations'.

Any FY experience must be responsive to the needs of the demographic subgroups' demands in that academics and administrators must integrate their efforts to benefit all students. The majority of respondents reported that they are first in family to study at university. It is due to their lack of social capital that they need encouragement from the University to gain the confidence, knowledge and skills to participate in community engagement (Krause et al 2005).

Discussion and Conclusion

Today's School Leavers: The "Me" Generation or the "We" Generation? Nuts and Bolts

3

The aims of this study are to encourage active and collaborate learning and to better understand how to increase this generation of school leavers' sense of belonging to the University community. Excerpts from students' reflective journals:-

Dental student in Peru. *While I was aware that living and working conditions would be poor, the actual state of things still shocked me. What more the children were smiling and the only time I saw a sad face was when playground accidents occurred. It made me realise the things we take for granted such as flushing toilets, safe water and electricity. How fortunate I am to have so many opportunities. I am more determined to succeed and not waste them.*

Medical student. *Peruvian time is very different to Australian time, plans change 3 times and then again the morning of. I found this concept quite difficult as I am a person who likes to be organised. The idea got easier to accept, though I still need to work on my ability to accept change. The whole team learned to be more tolerant.*

Student reflection. *I feel used. I feel stupid. I feel helpless. Today we encountered some children ....I knew that they wanted to sell goods but I hate that I was naive enough to believe that they were excited and curious to see strangers. All they wanted was money. I noticed that when we continued our travelling that I was not thinking of the impoverished Cambodians as 'poor.' I'm thinking of them as the norm and everyone else as lucky or privileged. There are just too many 'poor' for me to think of them as 'poor'. They really are the norm. We need to be respectful of their culture, but at the same time maintain our values. Home. I miss Cambodia. I enjoyed teaching the children. I feel overprotective of their future. Will the next lot of volunteers teach them well? Will they make sure that the little girl in the front is looking at the board? I realise the important thing about volunteering is to not give money but to help people to help themselves.*

Medical student. *Here in Australia, the homeless and beggars are often looked down on and their homelessness is blamed on themselves by others. It never occurred to me that children would have to take extreme measures to get money.*

Student volunteer. *The attitude was more of 'You teach me something, then I will teach you', it was never one sided preaching to the other which was great.*

There is a tendency for inexperienced volunteers to blame others.

Design student. '*This was a good challenge, though, in self discipline and communicating to your teamies so that you didn't go crazy or tread onto many people's toes. There was a moment or two where this wasn't managed effectively and people got angry. It was a great lesson in group dynamics and relationship management. Valuable- I' m a little wiser on how to do it all the next time.*

Student volunteer. '*I guess the hardest part was a lack of knowledge on how to really handle the poverty. We needed to be better briefed by the organisers on how to handle the situation. Although we soon sorted it out ourselves by debriefing afterwards.*'

Today's School Leavers: The "Me" Generation or the "We" Generation? Nuts and Bolts

4

CE is win-win for universities, communities and students. Griffith like all Australian universities highlights service as an integral component to its mission. A growing pedagogical focus highlights the importance of community service for student development. The Project is sustainable and its legacy achievable because the goals contribute to:-

- the University achieving its mission;
- the Griffith Honours College maintaining its relevance to its communities;
- the community benefitting from volunteer labour and engagement; and
- the students developing through leadership, global and team work activities.

'We want our youth to make a contribution to society for which they will be remembered. We have always wanted each generation to think 'we' instead of 'me'. However, the future of youth depends on what is taught to them. Building a culture of the 'We' Generation can be achieved through the students experiencing compassion, being provided with responsibility and engagement as citizens (Ungar 2009). Through their experiences, students recognised that a more supportive approach to CE will build confidence, especially in FY.

Session Outline

10 mins   Presenter: Outline of the Project's aims and outcomes to date.

10 mins   Small Group discussion: Focussing on personal experiences with student community engagement and ways to enhance the Griffith Project.

10 mins   Whole Group discussion: Focussing on how this project might be transferred to another university and across Griffith University.

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Today's School Leavers: The "Me" Generation or the "We" Generation? Nuts and Bolts

5